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# CAPTIVATION, FALSE CONNECTION AND SECRET SOCIETIES IN SINGAPORE D.S. FARRER

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## ABSTRACT

Interminable ritual repetition of set movements (*taolu*) has resulted in Chinese martial arts facing trenchant criticism as being useless in fight sports, mixed martial arts, and actual combat. In Singapore, the neglect of body-callousing or conditioning methods in Chinese martial arts may render them unfit for unarmed combat. This led me to ask whether the entire edifice of set practice in the martial arts is based upon a false connection. Researching Hong Shen Choy Li Fut, a Chinese fighting style notoriously infested with gangsters in the red-light district of Singapore, I was informed that all Chinese martial arts and lion dance associations are triads. Nevertheless, even here I was shown curious dancelike interpretations for martial arts moves taught. Does the endless repetition of sets captivate the performer into a delusional belief that they are becoming a better fighter? Are the audiences of such sets, performed in dramatic rendition, similarly held captive in a false connection?

What is originally open becomes secret, and what was  
originally concealed throws off its mystery.  
Georg Simmel [1906: 467]

This article considers Chinese martial arts, secret societies, and the Republic of Singapore as part of a broader research project to illuminate the social implications of martial arts, ritual, practice, and performance. My task here is to describe and explain key findings from a decade of field research with martial arts groups in Singapore and Southeast Asia, during which time a vibrant academic literature on martial arts has arisen [Zarrilli 1998; Morris 2004; Downey 2005; Frank 2006; Boretz 2011; Cox 2011; Farrer and Whalen-Bridge 2011; Lorge 2012; García and Spencer 2013; Bowman 2015].

A peculiar *technique du corps* I encountered while observing a Chinese martial art led me to question *mala fides* in the transmission of martial skills [Mauss 1979: 107]. Psychoanalysis has long stimulated anthropological thought [Gammeltoft and Segal 2016; Hollan 2016]. Applying the psychoanalytic notion of ‘false connection’ to a secret society in the Republic of Singapore presents the opportunity to reformulate the anthropological theory of ‘captivation’. ‘False connection’ refers to a ‘negative hallucination’ produced when the ego is unable to access repressed, unconscious material, yet is compelled to fill the ‘gap’ in consciousness with some invention [Burgoyne 2003: 195-6]. ‘Captivation’ is psychological entrapment, where artworks function as ‘embodiments or residues of complex intentionalities’ to compel the fascinated stare of the viewer [Gell 1999: 213; Farrer 2015a: 40].

In my fieldwork, discussed below, ‘repressed material’ is analogous to secret, hidden moves, or sequences of moves (*taolu* or *quantao*), contained in martial arts sets. The *taolu* is the ‘artwork’ that captivates the performer/audience in a false connection, repeated in ritualized training, possibly for generations. Actual fighting experience, accompanied by training to make the body tougher, more agile, faster, and stronger through ‘body callusing’ methods, is required to acquire the skills (*gong*), and not simply the techniques (*fa*) necessary for combat [Spencer 2012: 96; Nulty 2017]. Provided *taolu* are trained as part of a comprehensive package of partnered, agonistic fighting skills, they are useful to disseminate combat skills, including tried and tested historic methods of assassination, bodyguard techniques, self-defence applications, and body-conditioning methods. All too often in the contemporary practice of ‘traditional’ Chinese martial arts, however, in Singapore and elsewhere, the combative essence of Chinese martial arts skills seems lost in the ritual repetition of form.

Examining the Republic of Singapore via a case study of diasporic Chinese martial arts raises delicate issues in an authoritarian regime that touts economic success as the *Realpolitik* key to its social evolution

[Tan 2012]. The fundamental premise of Singapore is that one-party rule is necessary to ensure the continued economic and moral survival of the nation. Defined via its ‘*monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force*’ within a given territory, the state has eclipsed the martial arts association, or militia, as the modern vehicle for community self-defence [Weber 1946: 78]. With regard to survival, control, containment, and the implementation of violence, the police, military, prisons and security services relegate traditional martial arts to the dustbin of history. Nevertheless, martial arts groups, many of which are simultaneously lion dance associations, thrive in Southeast Asia. In Singapore, lion dance associations are concentrated in Geylang, a notorious ‘red-light’ district [Warren 1993/2003]. Evocative ‘thick description’ of martial arts, prostitution, and secret societies disrupt the squeaky-clean, taken-for-granted Singaporean government script [Geertz 1973; Scott 1990]. In Geylang, a key informant explained to me that ‘the triads are the martial arts groups and the martial arts groups are the triads’. Anthropologists must interpret the ethnographic materials arising from participant observation, acknowledging difficulties that arise when ‘local knowledge’ is ambivalent, doubtful, or credulous [Geertz 1983/2000].

## SECRET SOCIETIES

Chen proclaims: ‘The ‘secret society’ (*mimi shehui*) is an ambiguous concept’ [2005: 77].<sup>1</sup> The term ‘secret society’ may include criminal gangs of varying degrees of organization, bandits, religious cults, fraternal groups, and underground revolutionary political organizations [see also Ward and Stirling 1925; Comber 1959]. Outlawed under British legislation in 1889, the prohibition against triads continues under the Singaporean postcolonial regime [Fong 1975: 47]. Chin reports that there were 110 known gangs and 37 ‘active secret societies’ in Singapore in the 1970s, mostly ‘confined to “red-light” districts, thereby suggesting that they were mainly employed to protect prostitutes, brothels and bars’ [1980: 17]. Criminal organizations prohibited in Singapore under the Organized Crime Act 2015 include illegal triad groups (*sanhehui*), the 14K, and Wo Shing Wo.<sup>2</sup> To follow the ethnographic materials, I examine the claim that triads are martial arts groups and that martial arts groups are triads (albeit this claim was subsequently hedged, as seen below). My interlocutor’s point was that a broad *social* interpretation of ‘triads’, as community organizations, juxtaposes the narrow *legal* definition of triads as criminal secret societies. The community definition is a ‘logic bomb’ bursting the categorical seams of the colonial legal-rational definition of triads [Virilio 2004: 204].

1 Chinese terms occur in the text in Mandarin or Cantonese, depending on local usage (for example, *sifu* [Cantonese, or *Guangzhouhua*], not *shifu* [Mandarin], translated as ‘teacher; tutor; master’).

2 For the Singapore legal code, see: <https://sso.agc.gov.sg/>.

In my research, conducted in Singapore, Hong Kong, London, Malaysia, Southern China, and Thailand, it was apparent that illegal triads, secret societies, and Chinese martial arts associations are homologous.<sup>3</sup> This finding is backed up historically: Cheung Lai Chuen (1880-1966), the creator of Pak Mei (White Eyebrow), for example, led the triad group known as 14K [Judkins and Nielson 2015: 125-129]. Organized in rigid hierarchical structures, triads and Southern Chinese martial arts groups share origin myths from the fabled Fukien Shaolin temple and a performative tradition of cult-like rituals to enter discipleship (*yup moon diji*, lit. 'enter the door disciples') to specific masters, pledging oaths of lifelong, exclusive allegiance [Comber 1959; Elliot 1998; ter Haar 2000; Boretz 2011; Farrer 2013: 152]. Practitioners must apprentice in the martial art for several years prior to the honour and responsibility of discipleship. The appropriate waiting time is important. Once committed there is no way out except expulsion or death. For sociologist Mak Lau Fong [1975; 1981], given 'indirect rule' in the colonial era from the seventeenth century onwards, the *kapitan* (communal leader) utilized the *kongsi* (secret society) in the socio-political organization of the diasporic Chinese community (comprised of mixed, Hokkien, Hakka, Teochew, and Hainanese residents). Fong's highly significant conclusion reveals that 'the indirect rule system presented the early Chinese *kapitans* with a problem of effective control of their own people, and the triad organization provided the solution for it' [1975: 56].

Singapore is a long-term social experiment in Overseas Chinese state capitalism, which was ignited during the British Empire and accelerated by Lee Kuan Yew (1923-2015),<sup>4</sup> who maintained close ties with the British secret services MI5 and MI6 [Davies 2004; Walton 2013]. Triads, secret societies, and the state engineer and profit from 'gangster capitalism' in Asia and beyond [Woodiwiss 2005; Kaplan and Dubro 2012]. Capitalism comes into the world dripping head to foot in blood. It may be said that staunch anti-corruption ideology, combined with the legal artifice of outlawed secret societies, masks the State in its becoming-pimp/triad/gangster. With the emergence of President Trump, the analysis of gangster capitalism is especially pertinent in the United States, but this is a subject for another paper. For now, following a note on methods, I outline notions of capture, false connection, captivation, and the Singaporean social context before returning to the question of the validity of taolu for self-defence. The topic of false connection and captivation in the social structure is implicit throughout the following text concerning prostitution, secret societies, martial arts, and the state.

3 See also Boretz [2011] for a similar anthropological finding in Taiwan.

4 Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, later Senior Minister and then Minister Mentor until his death in 2015.

## FIELDWORK

Fieldwork for this research was conducted within three martial arts 'schools', including classes with several grandmasters from the Chin Woo Athletic Association, Sifu Ge Chun Yan's Cheng style *baguazhang* and *xingyiquan* class, and with the Singapore Hong Sheng Koon Chinese Koontow and Lion Dance Society (henceforth 'Hung Sing').<sup>5</sup> Research occurred during nine years of residence in Singapore, from 1998-2007, with a one-month follow-up in 2013. For 30-months, I apprenticed (*túdi*) to Ng Gim Han, an Eagle Claw master. Field notes, photographs, and video footage were gathered in Singapore, augmented by multiple research trips to Malaysia, China, Thailand, and Hong Kong.<sup>6</sup> Nine months before departing from Singapore, I gained access to Hung Sing, a 'closed-door' fighter's group.

Where the body is considered a site of knowing, or an epistemological starting point, 'embodiment' provides a 'methodological device' [Zarrilli 1998; Csordas 2002; Mroz 2011]. Embodiment here means studying martial arts with 'somatic modes of attention' and regarding the body as the existential ground for experience [Csordas 1993: 138; Downey 2005: 98].<sup>7</sup> In martial arts performance ethnography, the researcher learns martial arts skills as an apprentice [Zarrilli 1998: 255 n6; Wacquant 2004; Downey 2005: 51; Mroz 2011; Sieler 2015: 2].<sup>8</sup> As shown in academic investigations of boxing and capoeira, apprenticeship in Chinese martial arts is a collective endeavour [Wacquant 2004: 16; Downey 2005: 52].

This research was possible because of the active collaboration of elders from the Chin Woo Athletic Association, *jingwu*, or the 'pure martial arts association' [Morris 2000; 2004]. After I had intensively learned over fifty armed and unarmed sets, jingwu masters introduced me to Chia Yim Soon, sifu of Hung Sing, so that I might experience a fierce Chinese fighting school. Jingwu practitioners helped to translate deep concepts, and advised me during each stage of the research, from the initial commencement to fieldwork withdrawal. With jingwu, I became part of a community of martial scholars and expert practitioners,

5 **Koontow**, typically spelled **kuntao** (Hokkien 'head/fist'), refers to Chinese and Malay mixed martial arts in Southeast Asia [see also Davies 2010: 312-317].

6 In Singapore I became fluent in Malay and Singaporean Chinese, or 'Singlish', a fusion of Mandarin, Hokkien, Cantonese, and other Chinese 'dialects' with loan words from Malay, English, Thai and elsewhere. Yang Feng, a martial arts practitioner for three decades, was my occasional translator, collaborator, and training partner.

7 By 'embodiment', I do not mean the body as a 'container' for spirit, essence, or agency in the sense dismissed by Ingold [2011: 10; 2013: 94].

8 On research methods in martial arts, see Farrer [2015b].



and I was provided the opportunity to discuss and train martial arts with grandmasters, masters, and students in Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, China, and Hong Kong. Following a black sash in East River Southern Praying Mantis and a decade of research into silat, the jingwu experience greatly augmented my knowledge of the skills and techniques of Chinese martial arts.

My involvement with Hung Sing was a profound ethnographic encounter, a martial arts master class rather than a finalized apprenticeship. Hung Sing is a fighter's club. The exercise was not undergone for health, longevity, spiritual awareness, or the cultivation of better selves, albeit such outcomes might result from 'disciplining the body' in Asian martial arts [Foucault 1988; Wetzler 2015; Goto-Jones 2016]. Students joining Hung Sing do so for a variety of reasons, especially the practical desire to learn to fight, as well as to perform lion dance with a renowned school. Alternative reasons for joining, such as to become a member of a 'gang', fraternity, or 'social club' may be evident for some associates who never train martial arts, let alone perform lion dance. Mostly elders, these associate members regularly play *mah jong* in the kwoon, accompany the group on foreign holidays, and support the club fighters during competitions abroad. Some turn up for occasional nights out drinking beer in Singapore. During one trip, the international network of practitioners and associates turned up for a black dog ceremonial dinner in China, followed by massage, clubbing, and karaoke to celebrate the opening of a new school in Guangzhou.

To interpret the ethnographic findings presented here, the anthropological theory of 'captivation' is presented. Captivation adapts to, and is itself reconfigured by, the psychoanalytic concept of 'false connection' [Gell 1998; Burgoyne 2003]. In Singapore, captivity and false connection are facets of the 'apparatus of capture', where the state, martial arts associations, and triads capture bodies, minds, attention, time, resources, and commitment.

## APPARATUS OF CAPTURE

According to Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, 'apparatus of capture' is the foundation of the state, a machine to hold people captive through credit, land, rent, rates, taxes, and especially debt [Deleuze and Guattari 1980/2002: 437, 443; Graeber 2011]. Singaporeans are enmeshed in a complex overarching state apparatus of COE,<sup>9</sup> HDB,<sup>10</sup>

maids,<sup>11</sup> compulsory National Service,<sup>12</sup> CPF,<sup>13</sup> ERP,<sup>14</sup> Medicare,<sup>15</sup> and they routinely suffer endless debts, bills, tickets, coupons, and fines. For most, this is 'normal' and hence uncritically accepted.<sup>16</sup> The stultifying, oppressive atmosphere of ubiquitous government control and containment, known locally as 'rock fever', leads expatriates, or 'ex-pats' (polite Singaporean parlance for wealthy immigrants), to flee the country in droves, every weekend, to Malaysia and further afield. Nevertheless, for multimillionaires, Singapore is a giant fortified bank in 'shopping paradise' where money buys the freedom to purchase anything from designer narcotics (so new they are yet to be banned) to underage Russian girls [Chua 2003].

For millennia, martial practitioners, warriors, outlaws, and secret societies supplied 'war machines' to alternately challenge or facilitate the state in Asia [Deleuze and Guattari 1980/2002: 351-423; Shi and Guanzhong 1980/2007; Lorge 2012]. In time, states branded, hunted, and destroyed these war machines as criminal, terrorist, anti-structural entities. Eventually, the state's military, police, and diplomatic (as well as theatrical, sportive, ritual and celebratory) offices absorbed the war machines. Contemporary states exhibit an uneasy relationship to the martial arts groups in their midst. Control of the war machine is central to the apparatus of capture, which is the defining attribute of the state.

Beginning in 1974, all martial arts groups in Singapore had to be registered under the Martial Arts Instruction Act. Groups that fell under the act were organized as corporate enterprises with a CEO at the helm, chairing a committee of shareholders. The list of incumbents included a treasurer, secretary, and martial arts instructor(s). The 2003 repeal of the martial arts ordinance may signal the quantitative and qualitative demise of Chinese martial arts in Singapore, the achievement of a policy goal with small, self-organized, and registered groups practicing insignificant martial arts that no longer require overt monitoring or legislation.

9 'Certificate of Entitlement', a government surcharge necessary to register, purchase, and drive a vehicle in Singapore, currently \$36,000 [http://bit.ly/2nTgpKb].

10 'Housing Development Board'. At least 80% of Singaporeans live in government housing [http://bit.ly/1Vedh2y].

11 On 'foreign domestic workers', see [http://bit.ly/2nrK2il].

12 [http://bit.ly/2nEW4Gw].

13 'Central Provident Fund', a compulsory retirement saving scheme [http://bit.ly/2hfVqV].

14 'Electric Road Pricing' [http://bit.ly/2o7bH9c].

15 Medical health insurance [http://bit.ly/1nHROUQ].

16 See [http://bit.ly/2oHFkgT].

## FALSE CONNECTION

The idea of 'false connection' developed from the study of the peculiar behaviour of subjects in hypnosis. The classic account goes like this: A person is hypnotized and told that a table occupies the middle of a room, although no table is present. Instructed to forget the implantation of the suggestion, the subject, upon 'awakening', is summoned across the room. Avoiding the direct route, the edge of the room is traversed. Afterwards, when questioned why they took a roundabout route, they say, for example, 'Oh, there is a radiator on the side of the room and I felt cold so I walked around to warm up'. Such experiments demonstrate false connections, 'crossed wires' between remembering and forgetting, betwixt unconscious behaviour and conscious explanation. In psychoanalytic literature, false connection is mostly discussed in reference to transference, when the analysand (patient) makes positive attributions in the economy of desire, or falls in love with the analyst.

According to Burgoyne, false connection occupies a central place in psychoanalysis 'at the heart of the functioning of consciousness' [Burgoyne 2003: 195]. Freud paired false connection with 'the hypotonic phenomenon of negative hallucination in which a person can be induced to fail to perceive consciously what on some other level they can actually perceive' [Burgoyne 2003: 195-196]. Burgoyne continues:

Freud rapidly extended this phenomenon from the hypnotic domain to the realities of everyday life, by establishing that the defence of repression produces exactly the same effect. Unconscious knowledge and perception, once created by repression, produce the conditions for a conscious failure to perceive. In this situation, to find the real connection between events in consciousness often demands an access to inaccessible material; this real connection is then unavailable, and the ego confronts a gap in consciousness. Freud claims that the ego seems to be impelled to a compulsive filling-in of such gaps, and that when such real connections are unavailable the ego fabricates connections – fictive and distortive accounts of the world – simply because it cannot bear to construct an account that bears more closely on the real nature of the world. [Burgoyne 2003: 196]

For anthropological purposes, the concept of false connection needs adjustment. An electrical analogy of a wired consciousness inside the head is problematic. Consciousness may be understood as an arc from the individual to the group over time [Bateson 1972/2000: 135]. Beyond individual psychological phenomena, false connection operates in social domains, practice, and discourse. To claim that everybody is under some collective hypnotic spell, misremembering, offering *ex post facto* pseudo-rationalizations for their behaviour (even if such spectacles

as mass consumerism or fanatical religious action may indicate otherwise), misses the subtlety of Freud's formulation, where 'everyday consciousness fabricates realities which misrepresent the nature of the world: that underneath such errant reality lies the structure of the unconscious' [Burgoyne 2003: 196].

## CAPTIVATION

*Captivation* means to hold or charm an audience's interest and attention, where the verb 'charm' may be substituted for enthrall, enchant, bewitch, fascinate, beguile, entrance, enrapture, delight, attract, allure; engross, mesmerize, spellbind, or hypnotize. Switching from the aesthetics of beauty to the paralysis of fear results in 'transfixation'. In *Art and Agency*, Gell [1998: 68-72] relates how an artwork exerts 'agency' to ensnare the viewer in a 'cognitive trap' [Farrer 2008]. To illustrate, by way of example, Gell [1998: 84] argues that *kōlam* (geometrical patterns of lines and dots drawn with flour by Indian women on doorsteps) function as 'demonic fly-paper'. The demon becomes captivated while trying to decipher the complex twists and turns laid down in the design, and thus fails to cross the threshold. The upshot is that Gell's [1998: 84-90] 'apotropaic patterns' might be useful to explain Celtic funeral ornaments and the labyrinth design found at Knossos and elsewhere.

Ingold [2007: 56] dismisses Gell's 'areal perspective' from a 'demon's eye view', arguing that the labyrinth is hidden from sight under the surface in tunnels underground, with the dots among the lines (threads) perhaps signifying entrances to the underworld. Against *agency* (which Ingold [2011: 28] ridicules as 'magical mind-dust', supposedly embodied in a design that captivates the viewer), Ingold suggests that 'the *kampi kōlam* more likely exercises its protective functions by catching them in the labyrinth, from which they can no more escape than ghosts in the world of the dead' [2007: 57]. The same theory applies to the Devil caught up in Celtic knot work [57].

Regarding the *kōlam* pattern as the 'captivation' of a demonic viewer underground by design, however, seems of little use to explain *taolu*, and further analysis is needed to develop the theory of captivation. Viewed via the anthropology of performance, from the embodied practice of Chinese martial arts, patterns are performed and danced by practitioners [Turner 1988]. Albeit they may be practiced in quietude, *taolu* are frequently performed in dramatic procession. A fiery spectacle of drums, cymbals, gongs, stamping feet, and vocalizations combine with movement to enthrall, enrapture, and captivate the audience. Simultaneously, the whirling performer may experience an ecstatic state through vertigo or *ilinx* [Turner 1998: 127; Callois 2001].

Pattern performance is ubiquitous in national demonstrations of martial prowess in China (wushu), Korea (taekwondo), and Japan (karate). In Tamil Nadu and Kerala, *Kalaripayattu* practitioners learn martial arts sets towards actor training in *kathakali* theatre. Further research is required to confirm how such patterns relate to the *kōlam*. But beyond lines, threads, or agency, adept bodily movement provides a clue to interpreting these mysterious designs.<sup>17</sup> Martial arts sets are polysemous and relate to mythological themes, the ouroboros, celestial configurations, religious symbolism, and historical occurrences; including political assassinations, social upheaval, and community uprisings [see also Mroz 2017].<sup>18</sup> Yet, martial sets also register at another level of performance in restorations of violent behaviour versus their premeditated responses.

Conceiving false connection and captivation situated within the apparatus of capture (social structure) generates the following hypothesis: If the displaced logic of symbols ‘captivates’ individuals in embodied structures of false connection, then the symptoms appear beyond the level of speech/text in bodily movement (*habitus*) [Bourdieu 1977; Burgoyne 2003; Wacquant 2014]. Given that state capitalist regulation and control affects the capture of the body into systems of economic dependency and exploitation [Foucault 1979], the problem is to move beyond captivation, apparatus of capture, and false connection perceived as structures of unconscious, misplaced symbolism, or logic, to question how and why such phenomena persist at the level of the body [Kleinman and Kleinman 1994]. A preliminary answer is: *Because the state gets under your skin*. Turning to martial arts, prostitution, and secret societies illustrates false connection and captivation embodied in the apparatus of capture.

## SINGAPORE CONTEXT

Singapore is an island nation where selves are ‘crafted’ within the confines of a multinational, corporate, capitalist ‘culture’, facilitated by the oligarchic, technocratic, bureaucratic state [Kondo 1994]. The conformist environment boasts full employment for supposedly brainwashed citizens content with one-party ‘sub-fascist’ authoritarian rule [Haas 1990].<sup>19</sup> Truncating a phrase from colonial cricket, in Singapore, religion, race, and politics are ‘OB Areas’, considered out-

of-bounds for discussion. Singapore is a testing ground for the latest innovations in state intervention, surveillance, and control. Ubiquitous CCTV monitoring, electronic road pricing, the paperless office, and plastic banknotes were pioneered in Singapore years before their uptake in the United Kingdom. ‘Soft dictatorship’ ensures the rule of law and order, elite economic control, and individual acquiescence, thereby minimizing resistance to corporate hegemony [Neumann 1957]. Beyond Gibson’s [1993] ‘Disneyland with the death penalty’, however, Singapore is no ‘community of Saints’, and does possess a deviant, criminal element that is itself, of course, subject to the definitional policies of the State.

Singapore’s land area of 719.9 sq km has a total population of 5,612,300 and a population density of 7,796 per sq km.<sup>20</sup> According to government statistics, the Chinese comprise 74.3% of the population. Singaporean legislation prohibits a multitude of ‘offences’ including chewing gum, jaywalking, spitting, failing to flush a public toilet, littering, walking around naked at home, fellatio, and the supposed ‘gross indecency’ of same-sex relations.<sup>21</sup> Homicide, treason, rape and the possession of sufficient quantities of illegal drugs with the intent to supply incur the death penalty. Obey the rules, or else. Caning, fines, and freezing-cold cell detention are routine. Local newspapers regularly display headshots of executions carried out with the long drop hanging method. A former prison guard told me of a caning specialist at Changi Prison, a ‘Malay midget’ whose massive girth belied his sheer athleticism, spinning through 360 degrees to strike inmates with a thin, flexible rattan cane. Blows repeated up to 36 times carve a precise incision across the spine, risking paralysis.<sup>22</sup>

Democratic constitutional rights, freedom of association, and freedom of speech are absent. Government critics are sued for libel, fined, and jailed. The iron cage eviscerates discourses of difference, albeit regulations are phrased in polite legal-bureaucratic terminology. Uninterrupted in power since 1965, the People’s Action Party (PAP) rules Singapore with a white cotton glove stretched over a steel fist. The starched white uniforms of this self-avowed ‘national socialist’ party symbolically renounce the ‘social disease’ of corruption. Meanwhile, the ministers rake in million-dollar pay cheques. Companies owned through a string of familial ties related to the highest echelons of the billionaire leadership control business interests in SingTel, Tamasek Holdings, NTSC supermarkets, the shipping container port, taxi firms,

17 By extension, religious iconographic statues in temples of the 10,000 Buddha’s are not frozen postures but pre-filmic configurations of mystical movement.

18 See also the debate between Holcombe [1990] and Henning [2003].

19 On state-directed capitalism, see [http://www.economist.com/node/21543160].

20 Source: Department of Statistics Singapore [http://www.singstat.gov.sg/statistics/latest-data#17].

21 On homosexuality in Singapore, see [http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-29828979].

22 See Dahl [1984: 47-50].

Changi airport, Singapore Airlines, lucrative law firms, and research laboratories in science, technology, and genetics [Barr 2014].

Yet, this strictly regimented city-state tolerates prostitution. Formerly a triad run criminal activity, regulated prostitution operates under the auspices of the state. Doctors who are undergoing compulsory National Service have the unsavoury task of testing sex workers for sexually transmitted diseases. Yellow tags worn around the neck are issued monthly to sex workers who pass the medical. In Singapore, the legal/state apparatus of capture jealously guards all permissions and prohibitions, yet turns a pragmatic blind eye to prostitution, a sex-capitalist apparatus of capture. Sex workers are captive to pimps, ensnared in debt, medical bills, and drug habits (their own or significant others'). For the punters, or 'Johns', the economic pursuit of carnal pleasure violates the possibility of genuine loving relationships. Meanwhile, 'promoters' (pimps) are captive to the triads, and all are captive to the state, through taxation, medical screening obligations, and licensing.



Figure 1: Backstreet shop houses, Singapore

## HONEY TRAP

The 'evil' part of Geylang consists of forty streets (lorong) that fishbone the main road [Warren 1993/2003]. One hundred years after the coroner's records from which Warren distilled his 'people's histories' of Singaporean prostitution, three of the 'four evils' prevail, including prostitution, gambling, and drinking (opium has since been replaced by methamphetamine sulphate or 'ice') [Warren 1986/2003; 1993/2003: 239].<sup>23</sup> Teeming with coffee shops, bars, and brothels, Geylang boasts over one hundred lion dance associations. With lower cost rents than other parts of Singapore, much of Geylang's architecture consists of pre-war Chinese shop-houses, with steep front and back staircases leading into narrow three-story houses emblazoned with Chinese signs. Hordes of men gawp at sex workers throughout the night [fig. 1].

Geylang is the best place in Singapore to observe police raids, triad gangsters, and street fights. In a squalid back street at 2.30 a.m., I observed a drunken British expatriate shout, 'Come on then, I'll take you all on!' Six men entered the fray, one with a punch, dodged; another launched a flying kick that missed. The man slipped and fell, dropping his bottle of beer as another foe wrestled him onto the tarmac. Rolling on broken glass, blood stained through his white shirt. Three uniformed policemen approached as the crowd melted into darkness. Because real fights so frequently end up on the floor, Brazilian jiu jitsu and MMA practitioners as well as street fighters typically reject traditional Chinese martial arts as useless for self-defence. Regarding kung fu with contempt, a professional American MMA trainer/fighter I met in Singapore told me that traditional martial arts (TMA) are 'rubbish'.

With vibrant coffee shops open 24-hours, Singaporeans visit Geylang to order food or drink beer anytime, day or night [Farrer 2011: 222]. Tens of thousands of sex workers travel to Singapore from China, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, India, Eastern Europe, and Russia. Young women are lured by jobs in the 'entertainment industry', only to find themselves undergoing a 'hellish initiation of drugs, rape, and beatings' to transform them into prostitutes.<sup>24</sup> Around midnight, writing fieldnotes at a coffee shop after practice, by chance I met the abbot of Shuang Lin Monastery: a thick-girthed giant in orange robes.<sup>25</sup>

23 For an account of the 'economics of prostitution' in Geylang, see [<http://news.asiaone.com/news/singapore/economics-prostitution-geylang>].

24 See [<http://bit.ly/2ntOM7q>].

25 See Hurst [2012] on Singapore's Shaolin monastery.



Drinking heavily iced beer, we talked as the endless flow of prostitutes, punters, and promoters passed by.<sup>26</sup> Wiping sweat from his massive bald forehead, the abbot recommended that I create my own martial art, based upon training in water. For emphasis, he whacked my hand with his beefy fingers, a powerful backhand technique mastered by slapping water in a pool.

Another night, on another backstreet, I observed a young woman dressed in a black short slit dress and high heels forced up onto her tiptoes by a solitary blue-uniformed policeman. The officer's hair-pulling technique was clearly practiced. He forced her to walk *en pointe* in front of him like a ballerina shield. Specifically, he seized the girl's long hair at the nape of her neck in a clenched fist, straightened his arm, and pressed the proximal phalange [knuckle] of his little finger into the base of her skull. The policeman's other hand rested delicately on the hilt of his sidearm pistol. One hundred muttering men followed them down the street as the nervous officer sought to apprehend his captive away from the stares of the 'mob'. The brutal correspondence of triads and martial artists, police and prostitutes, hinges upon sex, money, and violence. Local men respect the hard work and long hours the 'working-girls' (*ji*, 'chicken') put in, envying the considerable salaries they earn, if not command. Yet another night, while training oversized weapons in a rat-infested back alley behind the kwoon, a sex worker and her middle-aged customer paused to watch. Hand-in-hand, for fifteen minutes, they laughed and joked, enjoying the spectacle of sweaty bodies in practice. Nonetheless, any romantic image of 'money couples', or solidarity between punters and prostitutes, must not distract from the fear, violence, slavery, rape, and paedophilia of a place where vile misogyny undercuts chivalry. 'You fuck them and forget about it', a gang member says.

Geylang's 'honey trap' forms a semi-legitimate ghetto, a working prison for temporary migrants held captive in a brutal sex economy. In 'fish tank' displays of 'abject pathetic aesthetics', women have numbers on discs pinned to their bikinis [Chua and Wong 2012]. After the number is selected and the fee paid, the 'customer' follows the woman into her cell, where she lives, eats, sleeps, and works, seven-days a week, for eighteen-months at a time [Ng 2011]. Extraction is difficult for victims ensnared in the sex-economy. Significant cash earnings attract the attention of organized criminals. The members of some martial arts associations regard their role as ethical, anti-triad, and may see their role heroically, perhaps aiding victims to escape. Meanwhile, the triads continue to oversee the sex and drug economy.

26 As living off the income of prostitutes or pimping is illegal in Singapore, pimps may be referred to as 'promoters' [http://news.asiaone.com/news/singapore/vice-vice-paradise].

## HUNG SING

Hung Sing is a branch of *choy li fut kuen* [*califoquan*], a Chinese martial art founded by Chan Heung in 1836 in Guangdong Province, Southern China. An amalgamation of three Chinese martial arts, *choy li fut* emerged during the peasant rebellion and warlordism of the 1900s. Chia *sifu* initially learned *jow ga* as a teenager growing up in Singapore.<sup>27</sup> Outnumbered in a street fight, Chia and friends received a thorough beating. Chia asked his *sifu* how to improve his fighting skills, but the *jow ga* master said: 'Next time, run away'. Exasperated, Chia left *jow ga* for *choy li fut* [fig. 2]. Nowadays, at Hung Sing kwoon, unarmed forms and weapons sets from *jow ga* and *choy li fut* are taught, with Chia's emphasis on aggressive, practical fighting applications.<sup>28</sup>

27 For *jow ga* particulars, see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jow-Ga\_Kung\_Fu].

28 For *choy li fut* particulars, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Choy\_Li\_Fut].

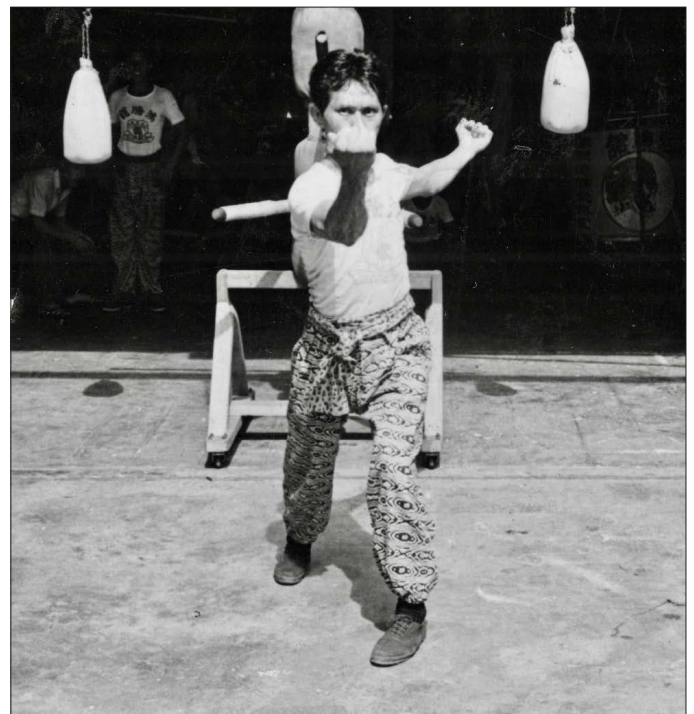


Figure 2: Sifu Chia Yim Soon

## WEAR ONE SHIRT

At dusk, I met Zhou sifu and Yang Feng in a coffee shop on Lorong 14. A rat scurried into an open drain as they consumed prawn noodles. 'How was it?' I ask. 'Lousy', said Yang Feng. 'Not bad', replied Sifu. Yang Feng looks perplexed, backtracking to say, 'OK', to be in line with Sifu. During the next thirty minutes, they discussed Chia sifu's absolute, oft-repeated rule that to learn his style the student must first become a disciple. Yang Feng explained:

You know the meaning of 'wear one shirt'? ... Wear one shirt means a code of loyalty; they are not exactly the same as triads, except you take on a discipleship, swear an oath of loyalty and have to turn up to all and any events as they call you – otherwise they will fuck you up. I am not sure how they will fuck you in modern Singapore, but fuck you they will and for good [Fieldnotes, 24/01/2007].

Visiting Guangzhou, China, with members of Hung Sing, I filmed a choy li fut discipleship ceremony. Two kneeling men offered tea to the master, exchanged red packets containing money, swore thirty-six oaths, and kowtowed to the sifu and the altar. The crowded room was thick with smoke from six-foot tall joss sticks offered to Lord Guan. Disciples swore not to reveal the secrets of the society and to uphold their master's teaching passed down through the generations. Only those who 'wear one shirt' make it to the memorial wing to be remembered and honoured after death [fig. 3].

Loyalty and dedication is the key to the 'wear one shirt' dictum. Commitment is demonstrated by attending events, at Chinese New Year, and on feast days such as Lord Guan's birthday. For Chia, that only one person from the club was available to attend a funeral wake indicated that the school was in decline. Learning Chinese martial arts in Singapore involves full participation in actual and fictive kinship groups.<sup>29</sup> Clan membership helps to secure mortal needs, bury the dead, tackle malicious enemies, seize opportunities, gain employment, and secure accommodation when travelling [Watson 1982]. But where does the individual turn when their clan turns against them? In situations involving intra-clan violence, the martial arts *kwoon* comes into its element. Martial arts fictive kinship 'star groups' provide support networks, protection, and succour for those who have become dislodged or alienated from their clan membership, especially the poor and disadvantaged [Turner 1988: 44-45; Judkins and Nielson 2015].

29 **Sifus** are surrogate parents to groups of uncles and aunts, brothers and sisters, and nieces and nephews [seniority is accorded for time spent in the group].



Figure 3: Hung Sing memorial deathscape, Singapore, 2007



Figure 4: Hand-held drum-shaped rattle (bōlànggǔ)

## DO YOU KNOW HOW TO DANCE?

The stylized movements of Chinese martial arts sets are ‘strips’ of movements, ‘restorations’ of combative behaviour and their premeditated responses [Goffman 1974: 10; Schechner 1985: 35-36]. During instruction, the moves are taught as named individual positions, or ‘stances’. A common set of recurrent motifs pervades different schools or styles, such as horse stance, tiger, and leopard motifs. Tong members display martial arts stances in everyday life to signify triad allegiance (for example, taking a seat by swinging a leg over a chair with horse stance [*mabu*]). Martial postures are strung together in various sequences depending on the taolu’s design and purpose. Exponents must discover how to apply the moves in combat, though some taolu emphasize footwork, athleticism, flexibility, balance, stamina, aesthetics, and power over fighting applications (*yìngyòng*).

Styles differ in the method by which the practitioner transitions from one position to the next, e.g. whether in the slow and graceful movements of *tàijíquán* or in the rapid extended swing-arm motions of choy li fut, where the fists swing like balls attached to the strings of a small drum [fig. 4]. The balls strike the drum to evoke the thunder deity, Lei Gong, who beats the drums strung around him with a spiritual hammer [Werner 1984: 200]. ‘According to Chinese reasoning’, says Werner [1984: 200], ‘it is the sound of these drums, and not the lightening, which causes death’. For Chia sifu, the swing-arm methods are ‘child’s fighting’, to be forgone in real combat. Alongside remarkable sets, Chia sifu teaches real fighting skills in one-on-one instruction, emphasizing body positioning, movement, and, more rarely, exercises such as finger-conditioning press-ups done on wooden benches.

Confucian etiquette forbids the student to contradict the teacher. In martial arts training, once taught, the moves must not be altered. To offer counter moves, or raise questions based upon alternative scenarios, is impolite, potentially resulting in loss of face. From the outset, however, Chia sifu encouraged me to show him the best techniques I know, learned during two decades of practice. Beyond taolu, Hung Sing dispenses with ‘blocks’ to go straight for the kill. Offence and defence are built into each strike. Strikes are designed to kill or disable the enemy. A simple, fast, and effective technique is to raise the lead arm using a slight jabbing motion to sink the fore-knuckles into the opponent’s throat. The ‘leopard paw’ skill is taught with footwork and body movements in a matter of minutes. Showing his ‘cha cha cha’ body turning skills, with a chuckle, Chia sifu asked, ‘Do you know how to dance?’ According to Chia sifu, Hung Sing can produce a competent fighter in three months, a sentiment echoed by one of the disciples, who said this is the best style to learn for those

pending imprisonment. Other martial arts require years of practice to develop pugilistic abilities, with decades of training needed to produce a black belt. Nevertheless, Chia sifu says Hung Sing is ‘dying out’ because today’s Singaporeans lack the necessary commitment, and are too busy at work and school.

Only because of my sweat drenched attempts to learn Chinese martial arts did the Singaporean masters open up to me. To enter Hung Sing, a ‘closed-door’ school for disciples, I had to obtain a formal introduction from Chow sifu. Chow sifu related to Chia sifu, in Cantonese, the story of how I had fought with another master at a martial arts class in a Community Centre (CC). The CC sifu said, ‘Let’s spar’, and punched me in the mouth. Tasting blood, I seized his head, and took him down with ‘the face’, a sticky-hand move that I had learned in the East End of London from Sifu Paul Whitrod of East River Southern Praying Mantis [Farrer 2013].<sup>30</sup> To be fair, the CC sifu was a talented actor in Chinese opera, and an accomplished performance acrobat, despite being a full-time wage slave exploited for excessively long hours in mundane tasks at a coffee shop. From him I learned to appreciate a perspective on theatre in Chinese martial arts that has influenced my writing [Farrer 2015a].

Anyway, upon hearing this story, Chia sifu stood up to ‘cross hands’ (spar). Nearing 70 years in age, Chia sifu remained lean, agile, and astonishingly quick. After a few parries, he slapped me with a deafening palm strike across my right ear. He tried to rub my ear as I pulled away. Chia sifu asked: ‘Why did you hold back?’ I answered: ‘Because I’m here to do research, not to fight you’ (and because Yang Feng, watching, had given me a profound telling off for ‘beating up’ the other master and ‘making him lose face’). Chia sifu said: ‘What would you have done if you were not holding back?’ I replied, ‘I would have taken you down with “the face”’. He motioned for me to show him the move and then scoffed, saying, ‘that won’t work’. Then Chia sifu invited me to try the technique on his class. I fought eight senior students, one at a time, given the condition that I use only this one technique as, ‘You’re a master; after all, they are only students’. In a charged atmosphere, seven men went down under ‘the face’, but the last student, Kian, a wrestler (*shuāijiao*), darted about like a loosed hosepipe. Disengaging, I joked to Yang Feng, ‘Ask [sifu] for a machete. This guy is not going down otherwise’. Panicked, Yang Feng said: ‘I can’t ask him that!’ Revealing his concealed ability to understand English, Chia sifu laughed, and slipped into his office. He emerged carrying a green cushion with a black sash folded upon it, awarded to me in honour of fighting his students. The black sash was the beginning of my instruction.



Chia sifu teaches me a set from **jow ga** and shows the application outside in the street behind the brothel-hotel. The only application I dislike in this form is the double 'blocks' to kicks. This is not well thought through. In fact, I showed him a better application (pulling the opponent down and punching the back of his head) for one of his techniques. I could see the surprise and recognition momentarily [dawn] on his face and in his eyes, but the mask dropped again instantly as he said I was wrong (or he would lose face in front of his students). [Fieldnotes, 26/04/2007]

Chia sifu shook his head when I showed him some moves from baguazhang, yelling, 'You've been had!' while unleashing a kick at my front, straight knee. Although I learned 'the face' in Southern Mantis, the principle, called *zhan* (adhering), also appears in baguazhang [Liang and Yang 1994: 171]. The skills (*gong*) learned in Southern Praying Mantis provided the application for techniques (*fa*) learned in baguazhang, yet taught to me in Singapore minus the application (*yìngyòng*).

## EPILOGUE

Do traditional martial arts, with their inherent secrecy, elaborate ritual, and training method of repetition to perfection of complex, elaborate forms (*taolu*), necessarily obscure the fundamental mechanics of effective physical combat? Bruce Lee said *taolu* is as useless in real fighting as 'land swimming' is to someone drowning [Lee [1998] 2016: 110]. The rejection of martial arts that promote *taolu*, as opposed to free sparring, rolling, and body callusing has assumed racist proportions against Chinese martial arts in Mixed Martial Arts circles [Spencer 2012: 96]. Fighters from Brazilian jiu jitsu, boxing, and wrestling dismiss Chinese martial arts as a fraudulent waste of time [Farrer 2016]. The Singapore government's lifting of the martial arts ordinance may reflect a similar dismissal of the agonistic potential of traditional martial arts. So, are Chinese martial arts primarily ritual, theatrical, or mnemonic devices, gangs, or social clubs, and not legitimate methods to learn self-defence? [Phillips 2016] Is *tàijíquán's* promotion of Chinese martial arts as gentle health and fitness *comme il faut*? We have seen that Chia rejected *jow ga* for *choy li fut* when told to run away rather than fight. Chia does teach effective methods for combat, such as throat strikes, but finger press-ups done across benches and other hard 'body callusing' exercises are rarely taught to Singaporeans too busy with employment and education to commit to traditional Chinese martial arts [Spencer 2012: 96]. Thus, it may be feared that Chinese martial arts in Singapore face extinction, as urban youth in Asia depart 'from the traditional norms of their culture' [King and Wilder 2003:305]. This

does not mean that set training is necessarily a waste of time, however; only that set training alone is insufficient to produce a competent fighter. To this effect, Yang Feng points out that Bruce Lee named his style of mixed martial arts Jeet Kune Do, or 'way of the intercepting fist', after the athletic *jingwu* fundamental routine called 'intercepting fist' ('Mandarin, *jiéquán*'), which he had learned.

The Hung Sing diktat that a practitioner may only 'wear one shirt' resonates with the wider political sphere. The ruling People's Action Party is a one-shirt organization, proscribing all and any genuine political competition. Of course, one shirt always has two sides, with corporate sponsorship on the back (literally, on the Hung Sing uniform T-shirt). Captivation is to be locked into false ideas, in an eternal return of the same, where no political alternative outside the status quo is to be conceived [Nietzsche 2000]. The ritual, repetitive practice of martial arts sets may perpetuate the false connection that effective martial abilities can result purely from dance-like training. Nevertheless, beyond captivating apotropaic patterns, a performative approach to set practice reveals the development of technique, footwork, bodily movement, balance, power, agility, and the visualization of combative responses to violent encounters. Trained with body conditioning methods, together with the revelation of effective applications, the fore-knuckle throat punches of Hung Sing prepare the exponent for prison, not the sporting arena. In the one-party rule of Singapore, the 'netizen' (virtual citizen) is powerless to resist the dominant regime and their corporate sponsors, and must work long hours in order to survive. 'In Singapore, you work or you die', as one of my silat teachers said. The emasculation of opposition to the State appears in an extreme case scenario in Singapore. Yet, this experiment in social domination and the removal of the will to fight is the envy of regimes worldwide that would try to permanently silence emerging alternatives to gangster capitalism, or the dominant global corporate-capitalist social order.

When the colonial grip was relinquished from Empire, the British did not simply abandon their imperialist agenda in Southeast Asia. British authorities continued to project their power through covert means, via capital, business, diplomats, officials, and spies, to implement the executive mandate of the State. Moreover, the historical legacy of British colonial legislation in defining social spheres as illegal continues into the present [Freedman 1979; Farrer 2009: 83]. The British defined 'triads' as criminal secret societies, a colonial legacy that continues in postcolonial Singapore and elsewhere. That some Chinese martial arts are closely affiliated with violent criminal triad gangs is indisputable. Equally, other groups are anti-triad, existing side-by-side in secret, ritualistic, fraternal organizations, however embedded in brothels, coffee shops, bars, restaurants, massage parlours, and the police and military apparatus [Boretz 2011]. Colonial definitions operating in present day regimes may offer important examples of false connection,



where narrow legal terms obscure wider, more complex socio-historic lifeworlds. The British, colonial, one-sided, reductionist legal definition neglects to perceive triads as a fundamental Chinese (criminal or non-criminal) form of social organization that mediates between the individual and the clan when the clan turns against the individual. According to my Singaporean interlocutor, 'all [Chinese] martial arts are triads'. That all Chinese martial arts are criminal, however, does not follow.

Ultimately, the ethnographic materials recounted here can provide no straightforward or definite answer concerning whether the endless repetition of sets captivates the performer into a delusional belief that they are becoming a better fighter, and whether the audiences of such sets are similarly held captive in a false connection. Just as in Singapore we can see an inherent ambiguity in that triads are and are not criminal organizations, my research reveals that Chinese martial arts are both useful and not useful for actual fighting. The casual dismissal of Chinese martial arts as useless for actual combat itself results from a false connection.

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